Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It will soon be time again for our Annual Meeting--which features the election of new Directors and our special POTLUCK DINNER. It's coming up on Tuesday, May 10, 1988, at the Lafayette Veterans' Hall. It is a unique experience which many of us have enjoyed every year; if you have not attended, I urge you to be there this year. Our featured speaker will be Wayne Korsinen on the subject of JOHN MARSH. We will also give a special salute to the original members of the Lafayette Historical Committee. The Historical Committee dates back to a year before Lafayette's becoming a city.

Jim Craig and Shirley Thomson, longstanding members of the Board of Directors, are leaving the Board this year and new people are coming on. We thank Jim and Shirley for their faithful service to the Lafayette Historical Society. I am sure we can count on their continued active involvement in the Society.

We are always searching for new and interesting subjects for future programs and field trips. Your suggestions will be most welcome.

I hope to see you at the annual potluck dinner on May 10.

Sincerely,

Ollie Hamlin

Tuesday, May 10, 6:00 p.m.

POTLUCK DINNER - ANNUAL MEETING - PROGRAM ON PIONEER JOHN MARSH

Lafayette Veterans' Hall

REMEMBRANCE AFTER A RECENT VISIT TO TAO HOUSE

by Mary Powell Flanders

In 1935 Eugene O'Neill and his wife Carlotta rented a house in our little town of Lafayette. Most of the locals probably had never heard of him. A few were excited to think that a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner had chosen to live among us. My parents were shocked: "An alcoholic, twice-divorced writer of the seamy side of life." Well, what would happen to our quiet little community? What other racy Bohemian types might move here too? My parents loved the theater but certainly not the plays of Eugene O'Neill.

Not only did the O'Neills keep a low profile, they lived in Lafayette only long enough to oversee the building of one of the loveliest pieces of property in our county, Tao House, in the wooded hills to the west of Danville. Indeed the house, gardens, orchards, pool--especially the view of Mt. Diablo--are all so very much like what my parents had created on their own hillside in Lafayette in the 1920s, one could only imagine that, had they met, they would have had something in common!

Tao House has white brick walls, with a tile roof overhanging long porches keeping the summer sun at bay and the inside of the house cool. The nut and fruit trees surrounding the house, the brick path to the pool with its poolhouse and barbecue, the smell of hot dry grass, bluejays darting between the live oak trees, the peacefulness of the country, but mostly the magnificent sight of Mt. Diablo from every window facing east--all this seemed so familiar to me, reminding me of the first home I remember and where I grew up, our own "House in the Oak Trees" as was inscribed in Spanish on the redwood beam over our fireplace.

But what different lives we led on our neighboring hillsides. O'Neill sat in his study, looking out at Mt. Diablo, ravaging his soul, pouring out the bitterest sort of autobiographical plays, one after the other, six in all, including another Pulitzer Prize winner, while he lived in Tao House those seven years--his last writing years it turned out. Carlotta fiercely guarded his privacy, encouraged his solitude, protected his fragile health.

With Pearl Harbor, World War II, and the ensuing shortage of domestic labor, Carlotta could no longer staff the house. They sold it and its one hundred fifty acres and moved to a hotel in San Francisco. With worsening health they returned to the East Coast a year and a half later where both eventually died.

Tao House remains for all to enjoy.

Editor's Note: Our thanks to contributor Mary Powell Flanders for her letter, her observations, her insight. Please remember that tours of Tao House are by reservation only. You can make arrangements for your visit by simply calling Tao House National Historic Site at 838-0249.

MAY 10 PROGRAM

A presentation by Wayne Korsinen on the evening of May 10 will give us an opportunity to meet John Marsh and hear his life story.

Marsh, who was born in Massachusetts and studied at Harvard (graduated in 1838), became the first American to settle in Contra Costa County. He grew to be one of the wealthiest men in California, was the first doctor in northern California, and was one of the first Americans to champion California statehood. But there was also a dark side to John Marsh. He was a frontier fugitive and a cutthroat competitor, regarded by many as a mysterious and miserly man, hated and hateful. His many-sided personality will be unfolded in the portrayal of him by Wayne Korsinen.

Korsinen, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, has taught history at Antioch High School for more than twenty years. We've had the pleasure of presenting a program by this serious student of local history on two earlier occasions--once as the ghost of Nortonville and on another time as the voice of Port Chicago. Both programs provided good history entertainingly presented. We hope you will join us and meet Wayne Korsinen in a third incarnation.

1988 DUES

Is there an "X" on your mailing label? If so, our records indicate that your 1988 dues have not yet been received.

Please pay dues on or before the date of the annual meeting on May 10. If you are unable to attend the dinner meeting, please mail your check to LHS, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette.

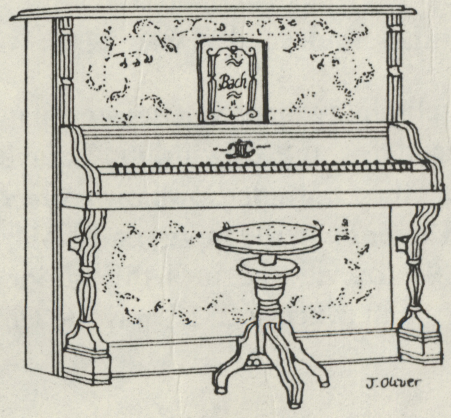
Family membership	*$ 5.00*
Student membership	*$ 2.50*
Bsiness membership	*$ 50.00*
Life membership	*$100.00*

Welcome to 1988's new members; we're happy to have you with us.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

When the members of Contra Costa County Historical Society host the three-day annual Conference of California Historical Societies in June (23rd through 25th), they could use the help of some local history-minded folks.

If you are interested in taking part in the event by serving on one of the host group committees, please call 939-9180. The agenda includes receptions, workshops, and field trips to Bay Area historical sites.



PRU MARRINER MEMORIAL

In memory of Prudence Marriner, the City Council of Lafayette purchased and presented two copies of *Moraga's Pride* to Lafayette organizations: Lafayette Historical Society and Friends of the Lafayette Library.

The books are a fitting tribute to Prudence Marriner; she was an active, effective, generous member of both organizations. Pru was a valued member of the Lafayette Historical Society during the years that she and Ernie spent in Lafayette.

Ernie wrote the Society in February acknowledging the gift of the books:

> "Thank you for your letter of February 10 telling me about the donation to the Historical Society of a copy of *Moraga's Pride* in memory of Prudence.
>
> "Although I am still trying to adjust to life alone, I manage to keep busy with a variety of activities, including service on the Maine State Legislative Committee of AARP. I had trips to China and to the Soviet Union last fall, was in San Diego for a week in January and in Washington, DC, for a week this month.
>
> "I have wonderful memories of Lafayette and its people, and I really enjoy letters from friends and acquaintances."

Ernie

Editor's note: Ernie's addres is R.R. #1, Box 1815-P, North Monmouth, ME 04265.

LHS Pres. Oliver Hamlin and Friends of Lafayette Library Pres. Maeve Pessis accepting books presented by Vice Mayor Avon Wilson for the City of Lafayette.

RENOVATION

Mt. Diablo Boulevard Master Plan

A preliminary landscape master plan has been prepared for the downtown Lafayette area. Termed the *Lafayette Downtown Street Improvement Master Plan*, the report dated March 1988 is available for viewing in a third-floor Planning Department office at 251 Lafayette Circle. Also available at that location are large-scale drawings of the proposal.

Much of the report concerns itself with landscaping and median installation along the length of Mt. Diablo Boulevard. From a historical viewpoint, the most significant areas may be Plaza Park and Golden Gate Way. Plaza Park is included in the report, but specific design in that area is to be considered as a separate project, not part of the subject study. Only incidental tree

plantings are projected for Golden Gate Way.

The plan was prepared by Russell Beatty, landscape architect, under contract by the city. A public hearing before the Planning Commission is set for May 19.

We urge you to make a point of looking over the plans prior to the hearing. Comment is actively sought by the city and by the Historical Society.

Demonstration Block

A separate project is the "Demonstration Block" on Mt. Diablo between Oak Hill Road and Lafayette Circle. This proposal prepared by Hirsh Morton, architect, is intended to generate a more specific street and landscape design for that area, including the appearance of building facades.

Historic Preservation Act Grant

A related matter: The Society has applied for a grant from the State Office of Historic Preservation for funds to prepare architectural drawings and specifications for Plaza Park and its environs, including a portion of Golden Gate Way. Funds are being made available by the 1988 Historic Preservation Act. As of this writing, it is not known if Lafayette will be named a beneficiary.

Thank You

Our thanks to Linda Jeffrey, Project Director, Lafayette Main Street Department, for meeting with the LHS Board at its March meeting.

LAFAYETTE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Save July 30 for a celebration of the twentieth birthday of the city. We expect to take part in the events of the day by providing a display on city history and by guiding walking tours focusing on historical sites.

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.

The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

--John Muir

NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

The 1988 Nominating Committee notes with thanks the completion by four people of three-year terms on the Board of Directors--Jim Craig, Elizabeth Johnston, Shirley Thomson, and Betsy Willcuts.

Besides the nominations for the four terms just expired, nominations for two short-term vacant posts, each with one year to run, are submitted.

New three-year term:
- Jack Bailey
- Nancy Holtzapple
- Wilbur Somerton
- Bill Wakeman

One-year completion of unexpired terms:
- Elizabeth Johnston
- Betsy Willcuts

Election of new members to the Board is scheduled for the May 10 evening meeting.

ANNUAL MEETING AND POTLUCK DINNER

MAY 10, 1988 - LAFAYETTE VETERANS' HALL

Social Hour 6:00 pm - Dinner 7:00 - Program 8:00

Program by Wayne Korsinen: "An Evening with John Marsh"

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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FIRST CLASS MAIL